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Cinderella's Sweets



Nicholas Stergos, owner of Cinderella's Sweets candy shop, prepares to feed the sugar cane candy to his assistants who shape, package and sell the goodies. Nick made candy in Rutland for over 30 years.

About the Author

David Zsido is an administrator at Central Vermont Public Service Corporation. He is also the author of "Antique Trucks," *Rutland Historical Society Quarterly* (Vol. 16 No. 4), "The Early Years of Company C, 368th Engineer Battalion, U. S. Army Reserve In Rutland, Vermont," *Rutland Historical Society Quarterly* (Vol. 34 No. 2) and "The Secrets of Glen Garage," *Rutland Historical Society Quarterly* (Vol. 36 No. 1). He has been very active in the "Over the Hill Trucks" organization that preserves, restores and shares information on old trucks. In this *Quarterly* he recounts his own personal memories of a phase of Rutland's candy history that will touch the memories of thousands of Rutland folks.

Introduction

For many years, especially during the 1950s and 1960s the north side of Center Street from Merchants Row to Wales Street was guarded at each end by a candy shop. *Fanny Farme's*, which was located on the west end near the intersection of Merchants Row, featured a wide assortment of factory-produced candies. *Cinderella's Sweets*, which was located at the east end in the Hotel Berwick Block, proudly produced a vast assortment of their own candy and ice cream, right at their 57 Center Street location.

Nicholas Stergos owned and operated *Cinderella's Sweets*, a business he began at the 57 Center Street location on 15 June 1931. He was born in Greece on 14 May 1894. Nick had been a candy maker his entire life and had actually started his career in candy making in other parts of New England in the early 1920s. *Cinderella's Sweets*, under his operation, continued as a prospering business into the early 1970s. The partnership of the business was last re-registered on 6 December 1971.

For a few years during the early 1960s David Zsido had a part-time job, working after school hours and during vacations, as the assistant candy maker at the candy shop. This brief recap of those years is dedicated to the memory of Nicholas Stergos, the owner and chief candy maker at *Cinderella's Sweets*.

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Cinderella's Sweets

By David Zsido

During the mid-summer of 1959, our family relocated from Proctor to Rutland City. As a youth, who was eagerly looking toward buying my first firearm for the Fall deer season, I needed a job to raise the money necessary to buy that first rifle. Good fortune was on my side. A neighbor on Clinton Avenue told me that a man, who lived just around the corner on North Main Street, needed someone to mow his lawn for the rest of the summer. Shortly thereafter I was introduced to Nicholas Stergos, who lived at 98 North Main Street. We reached an agreement on the lawn mowing chores. Essentially, he would pay me 45 cents per hour to do the trimming, and 55 cents per hour to do the mowing. The additional ten cents for the mowing was due to the fact that I supplied the lawn mower and the fuel for it. Typically, it took about three hours to complete the mowing and another hour or so to do the trimming. In addition, Nick also had some rather expansive flowerbeds throughout his yard, which required hours of tedious weeding. During one of my first encounters with one long flowerbed, I can remember reflecting momentarily, as I completed the work, that I had done a commendable job. Mr. Stergos was headed to the candy store for the afternoon and stopped by the flowerbed to observe my progress. Much to his dismay and mine, he told me that I had uprooted and tossed away a flower species with which I was not familiar. I received a short lecture from him about my error.

As the fall months followed, he kept me busy with raking the fallen leaves from the elm trees and birch trees in the yard. Nick had a clever way to actually reduce the work and dispose of the leaves at the same time. He rolled a short piece of page wire into a cylinder about thirty inches in diameter and equally as tall; fastened the ends together; and stood the cylinder upright in his wheelbarrow. Then all I had to do was rake the leaves into small piles; place them into the wire cylinder; set the leaves on fire; and then continually feed leaves into the mobile incinerator as I proceeded along. This was a fairly effective methodology, that is, unless the leaves were wet.

The property at 98 North Main Street was a relatively deep lot, which extended eastward, bordering the first couple of lots on Clinton Avenue to the north. Mr. Stergos apparently loved fruit and was desirous of growing his own. Contained in the open lot to the

east were perhaps four apple trees. Each year he would mow the field with a walk-behind sickle bar mower. I had to rake up the cut tall grass, and place it as mulch around the trunks of the apple trees. Still with all his care and attention the apple trees never seemed to produce any fruit. In fact, it seemed as if he had a similar difficulty with every other type of fruit tree or plants, which he had placed around his yard. Two peach trees along the westerly side of his garage did produce some peaches every year. However, they were about the size of golf balls, and probably just as hard. For the most part they were simply raked up and tossed away.

Inside the garage he had a wide assortment of power implements and gadgets intended for yard and garden work. This included: the walk-behind sickle bar mower, which also had a rototiller attachment; an electric powered chain saw; other power trimmers; and of course, his car. At this time, as I recall, the car was a 1956 Chrysler. This was replaced in later years with a brand new 1963 beige Chrysler New Yorker.

A long grape arbor stretched adjacent to the upper driveway to his garage for some twenty feet or so, and although it was well manicured and cared for, I never recall seeing any Concord grapes during the fall months. One, rather old pear tree, would faithfully generate four or five pears each year, but that was about it. Back on the southeast corner of his property he also had a chicken coup, but it was void of any chickens. However, it did contain several large cardboard boxes filled with old issues of the *Rutland Daily Herald*. When deer season finally arrived I had successfully earned and saved enough money to go to the sporting goods section in the basement of *Montgomery Ward* and purchase my first rifle.

During the following years, I continued with the lawn and garden chores for Mr. Stergos. However, this role was expanded in 1961 when he asked me to join with him as the assistant candy maker at *Cinderella's Sweets*. Apparently, my predecessor in that role was John Jeffo, who lived a couple of houses north of Nick at 102 North Main Street. John had left the small candy store, and Nick needed a replacement. The job offered the same rate of pay, which I had been making while doing various yard chores for Nick, that was, 45 cents per hour. It would be pretty regular work; requiring almost every summer afternoon. Then once the school year began, I would report to work after school every day. My first year, it was just a short jaunt down the hill from the Immaculate Heart of Mary School on Lincoln Avenue. The following years, I would walk to the candy store's corner location from Mount Saint Joseph Academy; stopping on a pretty regular basis at *Carpenter's Pharmacy*. The *Pharmacy* was then

located about half way up Center Street on the northerly side of the street. It had a small soda fountain, which for some reason, I discovered served an Elephant Sundae. The sundae consisted of a couple of scoops of chocolate ice cream, covered with marshmallow sauce, and then topped with salted peanuts. It was nearly impossible to walk past the *Pharmacy* without stopping in for that special treat!

To a young teenager, Nick seemed to be a giant of a person. His normal attire at the candy store was flawlessly white from head to toe. He invariably wore a white paper cap on his head and a white shirt and white pants with a white apron wrapped around him. Only his shoes were brown and they had thick soles with stubby flat fronts. Cleanliness was perhaps one of the single most important characteristics for Nick. The spotless white clothing, which both he and his companion Helen King wore, was a true testament to this fact, and the condition of the store was another sparkling example of this characteristic.

Perhaps the first lesson taught by Nick was how to operate the platform scale. It was necessary to take into consideration the weight of the large copper kettle before measuring the main ingredients of corn syrup and sugar. I never recall having a situation, where I had erred in apportioning out the ingredients, resulting in a bad batch. Once the large kettle was ready to be hoisted onto the gas burner, it required both Nick and me to move it the short distance of eight feet or so.

The next lesson, which was fundamental for an assistant candy maker, was developing the correct technique for stirring the candy batter, which was contained within the large copper kettle on the open gas flame. He showed the proper way to hold the three-foot long wooden paddle, and how to carve a 'figure eight' with it as I mixed the ingredients. It took a little correction from Nick to fine tune the speed and surface area covered, as I directed the large wooden paddle through a methodical 'figure eight'. There were two gas burners located along the northeast corner of the store. One was equipped with a vacuum hood and the second one was not. Often the process of stirring the mix seemed endless, but fortunately there was a large window by the hooded burner, so I could watch passersby on Wales Street or look across at Frank Nemera, as he repaired shoes or perhaps an old clock in his small shop on the east side of Wales Street at 36-38 Wales Street. In addition, when deliveries were made to the store, predominantly by H.P. Welch Express Company, the truck would park adjacent to the window. The driver of the 1954 Ford cab-over straight truck with a canvas top, was Homer Vadnais. I remember carefully observing the green and black truck with its

detailed pin striping, as Homer certainly kept it in great condition. Homer would wheel the fifty-five gallon drums of corn syrup though the side door of the store by the gas burners. In addition, the one hundred pound bags of granulated sugar were also delivered via that route. The one hundred pound burlap bags of peanuts or fifty pound tins of cashews were delivered down a short steep alleyway between the candy store and the *Tiki Lounge* to the north. These items were stored in the basement of the store until needed.

Unquestionably, the most difficult and tormenting candy to make, from my perspective, was peanut brittle. It started off by unwrapping twenty-five pounds of Swift's Premium Butter, which were packaged in quarter pound sticks. This was not too bad. However, once those twenty-five pounds of butter were placed into a short copper kettle and positioned on the small gas burner, things changed in a hurry. The hot-melted butter started popping and spattering as if it was hot volcanic lava. It took sheer dedication to faithfully execute the 'figure-eight' with the wooden paddle; knowing full-well that your arms were going to catch some 'direct hits' from the hot bubbling butter.

The smaller gas range without the hood was also used extensively to roast a variety of nuts. Typically, some Spanish peanuts were dry roasted in a simple cylinder device, which fit directly over the gas burner. This mechanical device depended on human input, that is, a large crank handle had to be continuously turned in a slow cadence to assure uniformity of roasting and also to prevent the nuts from being burned. In addition, other nuts, including Spanish peanuts, Virginia peanuts, cashews, and pecans were oil roasted over the same burner. Once roasted the nuts were lightly oiled and salted. They were placed into large display jars on the top of the glass counters near the ice cream-making machine. The nuts were sold by the pound and also used in other candy products. Perhaps the most vividly recalled application was using pecans and cashews in chocolate covered caramel clusters, or in nougat-centered nut rolls. The nut rolls consisted of a white nougat with dried fruit. The roll was dipped in caramel and then rolled in either cashews or pecans. These nut rolls were generally about ten inches long, and were sold by the pound.

Nick also made a variety of thin mints. None of these mint patties were dipped in milk chocolate. They were sold purely as mint patties. Peppermint, cinnamon and pink wintergreen were the most common types. The art of producing these small patties, about the size of a silver dollar, required a smooth rhythm, which Nick had obviously perfected over the years. The soft cream was poured into a

stainless steel funnel, which was about twelve inches deep. To control the flow through the tip of the funnel, Nick used a wooden dowel to block the outlet of the funnel as he lowered, poured and then raised the funnel to the next position. The soft candy cream was poured onto a black rubber mat that had very narrow grooves throughout its surface. When the cream had hardened, and the thin mints were removed, they had smooth – slightly domed tops with thin grooves on the bottom sides.

Cinderella's Sweets also produced a complete line of hand-dipped chocolates. The glass showcases were filled with a wide assortment of chocolates dipped in both milk chocolate and dark chocolate. The cream centers for the chocolates were blended on a rather large circular table that was perhaps four feet in diameter and approximately four inches deep. An arm, designed for blending the mix, had a series of short blades that rotated thereby kneading the candy. Once the right consistency had been achieved, the mix was placed into a stainless steel press. The press was a rather tall piece of mobile equipment, standing on four casters. The stainless box was perhaps eighteen inches square and eighteen inches deep. Once the candy mix was inside, the top cover was closed. It could then be cranked down by a large handle. The mix was forced through a series of small holes at the bottom of the press until the right thickness was suspended. Then a sliding grid of fine wires sliced through the candy, and dropped the candy centers onto a wax paper covered tray below. As the trays were filled, they were placed onto a wheeled rack. When this operation was completed, the rack was pushed into the chocolate dipping room. Helen King, Nick's companion, was the person who was in complete charge of the hand dipping of chocolates. She would spend hours in a separate room dipping the chocolates, one by one. The dipping room had a window facing the candy making operations, so it was easy to watch her doing this work with painstaking dedication. Each chocolate was inscribed with the final flow of chocolate with a symbol or letter, which would indicate what was in the center.

Perhaps the best or "top of the line" hand-dipped chocolates were those called French truffles. A close second would be the butter creams. Both were commonly dipped in dark chocolate and then rolled and completely covered with chocolate sprinkles. The French truffles had an exquisite creamy chocolate center while the butter creams lived up to their name and had a smooth buttery flavor. Their quality was reflected in their higher prices per pound.

The production of candy kisses consistently drew a fascinated crowd of spectators who could view the event from the sidewalk on Wales Street. There were a couple of common types of candy kisses made at

the store. Perhaps the most popular was molasses - peanut butter. The candy mix was kneaded out and then a long continuous roll of the candy was fed into the kiss machine. While Nick guided the candy into the machine, his assistant would assure that the larger mass of candy did not get out of shape by further rolling and kneading it. The machine would slice through the candy creating the candy kiss. The kiss would then drop onto colorful waxed paper. It was then automatically cut to the right dimension before the paper was twirled tightly by spinners. It was this wrapping process, which intrigued the bystanders outside. The wrapped kiss would then drop into a bucket.

Fudge was always a popular sales item. Nick made at least three different flavors: chocolate, vanilla, and maple. It sold so rapidly, that it seemed like we were always making fudge. Everything Nick did was done to perfection, and making fudge, although a common task, was certainly no exception. This included the exact placement of walnut halves on the top of certain fudges with precision.

During the early 1960s, Nick still continued to produce home-made ice cream on a limited basis. The ice cream machine was the back-drop for the north end of the retail space in the store. The task of making ice cream was one that Nick assumed for himself. The impression, which one might have realized about this phase of the tiny store's operation, was that Nick only produced ice cream for two reasons: one was to satisfy a handful of faithful customers, who routinely stopped by to purchase it, and the other was that Nick seemed to enjoy the flavor and texture of the ice cream himself. He seemed to have discontinued the production of ice cream altogether prior to 1964.

Unquestionably, there were two particularly busy seasons for *Cinderella's Sweets*. Christmas was the largest and the Easter season was also relatively busy. The Christmas holiday season was filled with candy making right up to Christmas Eve. It normally required longer working hours during the evenings to keep up with the demand for both candy canes and ribbon candy. Candy canes blended Nick's skills at candy making with his artistic nature. The red circular lines, which curled through the cane had to be cut and precisely placed in the mix. Then the candy mix had to be kneaded and shaped, while Nick extruded, cut, and shaped the handle of the cane. He would normally shout instructions to his assistant to assure that the mix was properly shaped and ready for his extrusion. Candy canes were made in a variety of lengths from a standard size of approximately eight inches to some in excess of eighteen inches. Nick would also accommodate special orders. The largest Christmas candy cane might have been nearly three feet long!

Making Christmas ribbon candy probably required the most human resources. As was true with making candy canes, once the process started, it didn't stop until all the candy mix was used up. Again the candy mix had to be kneaded, shaped, and constantly controlled. Nick would blend in the various colors or flavors, and then extrude the mix out into a narrow band, which he would feed into the truly amazing ribbon candy machine. The machine would stretch the candy mix and curl it into shape. This device rapidly fed the completed product out at the far end of the table, so many hands were required to keep the process moving smoothly. As required, Nick would occasionally bellow out instructions, if he felt there were any shortcomings in the process. This was particularly true if his assistant didn't keep the mix in the precise shape for which Nick was looking.

The Easter Season, although busy, was seemingly more relaxed. The store specialized in producing solid chocolate Easter figurines, which included Easter bunnies, ducks, chickens, and baskets. These items were formed in tin molds by Helen King in the hand-dipping room. There were simply dozens of different size and shape molds. Helen would use both milk chocolate and white chocolate to make the Easter figurines. After the chocolate had hardened, the Easter treats were then wrapped in clear cellophane. Some of the taller solid milk chocolate bunnies were nearly eighteen inches tall! In addition, large cardboard boxes, filled with new (empty) Easter baskets of various sizes, and other boxes with the green straw would arrive. Nick and Helen would decide what should be placed in each basket and what the price would be. Filling Easter baskets with jellybeans and homemade candies was far more relaxing than the pressure of the Christmas season.

Among the popular treats for the Easter season were the large nougat-filled Easter eggs that were made in the store. The white nougat centers were basically the same as those used in the nut rolls. However, in this case, the candy mix was cut into a mass about the size of a softball, and then hand shaped to resemble an egg. This egg-shaped center was then hand dipped by Helen King in milk chocolate, and then a minor amount of trimming decorated the top of the egg before it was packaged in a colorful box.

Nick would always comment during these Holiday seasons that he couldn't understand why anyone would want to buy any commercially manufactured candy. He would note that commercially produced candy had been produced many months before it was placed on the market for sale, and it contained preservatives. None of the candy produced at *Cinderella's Sweets* contained any preservatives. Nick was driven by a couple of attributes, which made his business so successful for so many

years. He constantly worked to assure the quality of the candy. Moreover, he was flawless in maintaining the cleanliness of his store and its equipment. The quality issue was astonishing. Nick always used the finest ingredients and never seemed to refer to any recipes. He pretty well expected that his assistant would commit things to memory as well. The candy produced in this small store was always made to the highest standards. Further, if Nick noted that his assistant candy maker had made even the slightest mistake, with a twinkle in his eyes, Nick would admonish his assistant by raising his arm and separating his thumb and index finger in a gesture by only the narrowest of margins, and say with the corner of his lips somewhat turned upwards, "you're not a big stupid.....you're only just a little stupid!"

From a cleanliness viewpoint, he was a perfectionist. All equipment, kettles, ladles, spatulas, floors, and anything else used during the day were always cleaned that day. It was never enough to simply wash a copper kettle at the end of the day. The assistant candy maker would also have to polish the kettles. The wooden plank floor would be mopped, and if necessary, a scouring brush was used to remove any sticky candy, which may have been embedded into the cracks in the wood. During the winter season, the sidewalk at the store's front on Center Street was kept free of snow during stormy conditions. The sales floor was also mopped up regularly during these winter conditions to assure that customers would not slip on melted snow tracked in by other customers.

Once Nick took his assistant to visit a friend in Gardner, Massachusetts, who also ran a candy shop, which was called *Priscilla's Sweets*. While the trip was supposedly intended as a visit of old friends, clearly on the return trip Nick made it apparent to his assistant that it was intended as a lesson to compare the cleanliness of the operations between the two stores. The trip left a lasting impression on Nick's assistant candy maker.

For a small store in the 1960s, business activities at *Cinderella's Sweets* required the talents of several sales clerks. In this era, this included: Angie Anagnos, Florence Bowker, Marie Connor, and Sophie Shappy. The month of August during the 1960s also brought another important consideration into Nick's life. That was the racing of the thoroughbreds at Saratoga. Nick was an avid horseracing fan. So when the month of August rolled around each year, you could expect that he would be leaving the store at an early hour with a handful of business friends from the Rutland community to make the trip to Saratoga. At one point in the early 1970s Nick even invited his former assistant candy maker to accompany him on a trip to Green Mountain Park in Pownal, Vermont, for an evening of racing.

Helen King, the store manager, was also the paymaster. Each week she would faithfully and accurately total the employees' hours; deduct withholding for taxes and Social Security; and then place the cash payments into small brown envelopes. My pay continued at a rate of 45 cents per hour from 1961 to 1964. However, in 1964 I received a pay increase to 55 cents. Unfortunately a week later I had to leave the job due to a temporary family relocation. Helen would also see that I had something to eat each evening, since I was working through my family's supper. Generally, she would telephone George's Restaurant on Wales Street, and order a tuna fish salad sandwich, or a sweet roll, and a bottle of Seven-Up as a 'take-out' order to hold me over. I would retreat to the stack of one hundred pound sugar bags near the basement stairway to enjoy my light snack.

Ultimately, between the advent of competition from the Downtown Plaza development and other retail expansion in the region, and also perhaps due to his age, Nick closed the business. The very ornate neon sign, which illuminated the front window of the tiny candy store for so many years as it spelled out the phrase *Cinderella's Sweets*, was shut off for the final time. Nick died on 15 November 1982 at the age of eighty-eight years. Helen King died a few years earlier on 27 December 1979 at the age of seventy-five years. A few years prior to their deaths, on 7 January 1973, the deadly Town House (Berwick) fire, reduced what had been *Cinderella's Sweets* to a pile of smoking bricks. Only the north wall of the candy store remained upright. Now people walk around that corner of Center Street and Wales Street, perhaps not realizing what 'Sweet Memories' had once been produced there.



The Home of "Home Made Candies"
Established 1931



Top photo: Cinderella's Sweets in the 1960s.

Bottom photo: The 1973 Berwick Fire engulfed the old Cinderella's Sweets location. Note the common light pole and parking meter.

